

The Church: Towards a Common Vision

A Commentary in Light of the Inter-Orthodox Consultation at Agia Napa in Cyprus

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Abstract

The 2013 convergence document, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (CTCV) incorporates several aspects of the response of the Napa Inter-Orthodox Consultation to *The Nature and Mission of the Church* (NMC) which, as its subtitle suggests, was *A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*, namely *The Church*. Eastern and Oriental Orthodox responders (jointly!) point to the imprecise use of the term, 'church', the World Council of Churches (WCC)'s understanding of 'the limits of the Church', and to the 'branch theory' implicit in NMC, an ecclesiology toned down in CTCV. Bordeianu proposes a subjective recognition of the fullness of the church in one's community as a possible way forward. Simultaneously, Orthodox representatives have grown into a common, ecumenical understanding of the relationship between the Kingdom of God and the church's work for justice; attentiveness to the role of women in the church; and accepting new forms of teaching authority in an ecumenical context. The positions of various churches are no longer parallel monologues, but reflect earnest change and convergence.

Keywords

Church – Orthodox – ecumenism – WCC – Faith and Order

Introduction

After more than a century of ecumenical dialogues, almost 70 years of involvement in the World Council of Churches (WCC), and ten WCC-assemblies, ecumenism is entering a new era. There are reasons to see the upcoming years as

the end of ecumenism: younger generations are skeptical about institution-ized religion and inter-denominational divisions seem frivolous to many of them; middle-aged inter-faith families see church divisions as adding to the difficulty of married life when faith is expected to help their marriages; older generations, once enthusiastic about the prospects of unity, are growing disappointed with the lack of significant ecumenical progress; and so-called 'traditionalists' of all ages are building higher and higher walls around their own groups. While acknowledging the validity of these perspectives and also faulting inflexible church institutions and ecumenical delegates who might have chosen to represent a safer side of their tradition when bold, prophetic, ecumenical impatience was required, there are encouraging signs that point to the new ecumenical era as one of significant accomplishments. Patience will pay off in the end.

A significant reason to remain optimistic is that ecumenism has already changed all those involved. This is especially true when analysing the Orthodox reaction to *The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement* (2005 — henceforth NMC)¹ as expressed at the Inter-Orthodox Consultation held in Agia Napa / Paralimni, in Cyprus (2011 — henceforth *Napa*).² On the one hand, the Orthodox responders adopted new attitudes, while on the other hand the convergence document on *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (2013 — henceforth CTCV)³ included many of their suggestions. Based on these three sources, in the present essay I analyze the development of Orthodox positions under the influence of the ecumenical movement and the Orthodox influence on ecumenism in regards to various aspects of ecclesiology.

Orthodox Change (To Stay Unchanged)

Sometimes, in order to stay true to oneself, one has to change.

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- 1 *The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*, (Faith and Order paper no. 198), Geneva: WCC Publications 2005. (*Napa* refers to this document as NMC). It incorporates the responses to its predecessor, *The Nature and the Purpose of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*, (Faith and Order paper no. 181), Geneva: WCC Publications 1998.
 - 2 Website of the *Ecumenical Patriarchate*, <http://www.ec-patr.org/docdisplay.php?lang=en&id=1310&tla=gr.>, accessed May 2014.
 - 3 *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, (Faith and Order paper no. 214), Geneva: WCC Publications 2013.

Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches

The first significant change is the fact that Eastern and Oriental Orthodox representatives responded jointly; *Napa* is the result of an ‘inter-Orthodox’ consultation — a bold assertion that both Eastern and Oriental Orthodox are part of the same Orthodox family. While other inter-Orthodox consultations preceded the meeting in Napa, they were less theologically substantial,⁴ hence this is the first major response signed jointly. Why is this significant? Largely due to their common belonging in the WCC, Eastern and Oriental (or pre-Chalcedonian or non-Chalcedonian) Orthodox churches have met first informally since 1964 and then in a Joint Theological Commission to discuss their differences. Culminating with the 1989 Anba Bishoi and 1990 Chambésy statements, a theological schism of over 1500 years has been healed.⁵ While Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox do not yet share the Eucharist formally (although such sharing frequently occurs informally), it is most refreshing to witness the solution of their past theological disagreements as well as their joint efforts to grow together in unity. This change in the composition of the Orthodox responders is noteworthy, and the healing of this 1500 year-old schism represents perhaps the most significant ecumenical accomplishment of contemporary ecumenism.

Social Justice and Political Involvement

A second change has to do with social justice. Before the Second World War, most Orthodox churches were deeply involved in the social, political, and economic lives of their countries, providing for the needy, healing the sick in church-owned hospitals, and teaching in schools. Under Communist militant-atheist regimes, however, most Orthodox churches became virtually absent from the public sphere and were coerced to retreat within the walls of their churches, confined to their liturgical life and academic theology. The values associated with the Kingdom of God — namely proclaiming the gospel in the lanes of the city and healing the world of sin, death, suffering, disease, and hunger — became secondary at best.

The opposite happened in the WCC. Especially after the 1961 assembly in New Delhi, the WCC agenda gradually shifted away from its earlier

4 Such meetings took place either before or after WCC-assemblies and only once did Eastern and Oriental Orthodox meet to discuss their common ecumenical involvement in relationship to theological education in Sibiu, Romania, 2010.

5 See: Thomas FitzGerald and Peter Bouteneff (eds.), *Turn to God, Rejoice in Hope: Orthodox Reflections on the Way to Harare: The Report of the WCC Orthodox Pre-Assembly Meeting and Selected Resource Materials*, Geneva: Orthodox Task Force, Geneva: WCC 1998, 145.

concern for theological unity, and more towards issues of justice and political involvement.⁶ One can imagine the shock of the Orthodox representatives witnessing WCC's shift toward issues of justice; social and political involvement was simply impossible for Orthodox churches in Eastern Europe. Perhaps as a counter-reaction to the lessened interest in theological unity, but also as a result of their situation at home, Orthodox delegates tended to favor doctrinal unity over justice.

After the fall of the Iron Curtain, however, a change has occurred. *Napa* shows a return to the earlier, pre-Communist Orthodox interest in issues of social justice, criticizing NMC for neglecting to define 'how the Church is related to God's kingdom.'⁷ This is a fair assessment in the sense that NMC does not provide a systematic treatment of this issue, even though it refers to the church as sign and instrument of the Kingdom, its work for justice, proclamation of the gospel, and mission. This recommendation was implemented in CTCV systematically.⁸ Moreover, the Orthodox response states:

While mission is primarily associated with preaching the gospel and making disciples, the service dimension of mission is equally important. The Orthodox have something unique to offer in this regard, largely stemming from our Tradition which consistently links the mystical liturgical experience with the imperative of healing and ministering to the poor, and redressing social injustices. . . . St John Chrysostom speaks about two altars: one is in the church, and we rightly revere it. The second altar is the poor, the suffering, those in need, the homeless, all who are in distress, and this one we (wrongly) ignore.⁹ This connection gave rise within recent Orthodox theology to the celebrated expression of "the liturgy after the Liturgy," the *leitourgia* for the world that emanates from the eucharistic Liturgy.¹⁰

6 Michael Kinnamon criticizes 'splitting the agenda' between these two concerns; he argues that it is imperative to keep theological unity and social justice together, which in turn will strengthen both of these aspects of Christian unity. Michael Kinnamon, *The Vision of the Ecumenical Movement and How It Has Been Impoverished by Its Friends*, St. Louis: Chalice Press 2003, 37-50.

7 *Napa*, § 42.

8 See primarily Ch. 1, section A; and Ch. 4, sections A and C, but also many remarks interspersed throughout the text. On this theme, CTCV articulates the values of the Kingdom better than NMC and adds the theme of religious pluralism to the discussion.

9 Their footnote 6 reads: 'See, e.g., *Hom. in Heb. xi*.' The reference to John Chrysostom was later included in *Church*, § 65.

10 *Napa*, § 36.

While some might argue that — especially under Ottoman occupation and Communist regimes — this tradition has not been as consistent as the responders claim, the consideration of serving the needy as an intrinsic aspect of Orthodox life is commendable.

And yet, it is also worth noting the special attention that the relationship between church and state receives in NMC and *Church*, but not in *Napa*. The two WCC documents emphasize the responsibility that comes with the church's ability to influence state decisions to further the values of the Kingdom (such as justice, peace, access to health care, equality, etc.), as well as the church's duty to protest unjust political and economic systems. Both WCC documents mention the need for churches 'to stand in the tradition of the prophets who proclaimed God's judgment on all injustice,'¹¹ but the Orthodox response refers to justice without using terms such as 'political' or 'state'. The relationship between church and state¹² is particularly sensitive in countries where the Orthodox church represents the overwhelming majority of Christians or even enjoys the status of 'national church', and where Orthodox hierarchs rarely protest the political and social systematic injustices in their countries. One wonders if a very close relationship between the state and the church does not diminish one's prophetic impetus . . .

Perhaps more could have also been said about the relationship between the Kingdom, justice, and creation. NMC mentions creation sporadically, without any substantive developments of this topic.¹³ *Napa* refers to creation only twice, and with no reference to priesthood towards creation or the sacramentality of the world — Orthodox topics that could have contributed to the subject at hand. While CTCV does not specifically mention priesthood towards creation, §66 states:

Together with all people of goodwill, the Church seeks to care for creation, which groans to share in the freedom of the children of God (cf. Rom. 8:20-22), by opposing the abuse and destruction of the earth and participating in God's healing of broken relationships between creation and humanity.

¹¹ NMC, § 115. CTCV, § 55.

¹² On the relationship between Orthodoxy and various types of political regimes, see Aristotle Papanikolaou, *The Mystical as Political: Democracy and Non-Radical Orthodoxy*, Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press 2012.

¹³ NMC, § 25-26 refers briefly to the communion between God, humankind, and creation, but not in terms of an ecological mission of the church or justice; § 36 merely mentions the church's 'service, which includes the stewardship of creation.'

While this statement could be an Orthodox contribution,¹⁴ such a claim cannot be substantiated based on *Napa*.

The Centrality of Ecclesiology

Thirdly, one could argue that divisions within Christianity have impelled Orthodoxy to regard ecclesiology as a matter of dogma. In turn, this Orthodox change resulted in the consideration of ecclesiology as the focal point of the current ecumenical movement.

Early controversies and ecumenical councils did not deal with ecclesiology proper, despite their ecclesiological implications and the numerous patristic engagements with various aspects of the life of the church. Moreover, ecclesiology itself is a relatively new theological discipline, dating in Georges Florovsky's estimation to the 15th century,¹⁵ so the Orthodox tradition knows no ecclesiological dogmas, ideally proclaimed by an ecumenical council. Thus, technically speaking, ecclesiological differences should fall into the categories of theological opinions or *theologoumena*, and not rise to the level of dogma, even when other churches raise ecclesiology to the level of dogma — as in the case of later ecclesiological developments in the Catholic tradition concerning the dogmas of papal primacy and infallibility proclaimed at the First Vatican Council in 1870. The Orthodox tradition was forced to consider ecclesiology as a dogmatic issue and, in turn, it placed ecclesiology at the forefront of the ecumenical agenda: 'the absolute centrality of ecclesiology to the ecumenical movement has been recently reaffirmed by the Special Commission on the participation of the Orthodox churches in the WCC.'¹⁶

14 Orthodox sources on creation and ecology are too numerous to list here. Two examples stand out: Elizabeth Theokritoff, *Living in God's Creation: Orthodox Perspectives on Ecology*, Crestwood NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press 2009, 167. Dumitru Staniloae, *The Experience of God: The World — Creation and Deification*, translated by Ioan Ionita and Robert Barringer, volume 2, Brookline MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press 2000.

15 As Georges Florovsky observed, a formal definition of the church did not appear until late in the 15th century, and was formulated by Cardinal Turrecremata. 'The Church, it seems, hitherto existed simply as a glorious and self-evident reality in history.' See: Peter A. Chamberas, 'Some Aspects of the Ecclesiology of Georges Florovsky', in: David Neiman and Margaret A. Schatki (eds.), *The Heritage of the Early Church: Essays in Honor of the very Reverend Georges Vasilievich Florovsky*, Orientalia Christiana Analecta 195, Rome: Pontificium Institutum Studiorum Orientalium 1973, 431.

16 NMC, § 2. That is not to say that WCC's ecclesiological focus is solely an Orthodox contribution, since the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order in Santiago de Compostela in Spain (1993), for example, proposed the same idea.

Today, we live in times of great ecumenical opportunity and challenge. Opportunity — because Christians of all traditions can formulate their understanding of the Church communally, and I propose that the documents under consideration in this essay represent stages in the process of formulating ecclesiological dogmas. Challenge — because ecclesiology, a non-dogma from an Orthodox perspective, is at the root of our divisions. In this sense, the ‘Introduction’ to CTCV states that it ‘addresses what many consider to be the most difficult issues facing the churches in overcoming any remaining obstacles to their living out the Lord’s gift of communion: our understanding of the nature of the Church itself.’

The above remarks about the dogmatic character of our ecclesiological divisions (or lack thereof) are significant not only for a proper discussion of the limits of acceptable theological diversity in the realm of theological opinions and *theologoumena*, but also for placing the church in its proper place in the divine *oikonomia*. Addressing the Kingdom as God’s plan for creation, CTCV affirms that ‘the Church was intended by God, not for its own sake, but to serve the divine plan for the transformation of the world’ (§58) and that ‘the Church belongs to God and does not exist for itself’ (§13). The documents under consideration are mostly inward looking, favouring internal church issues, rather than looking outwards and focusing on the mission of the church to the world. This is symptomatic of the current state of Christianity that, because of its internal divisions, it is hindered in accomplishing its mission towards the Kingdom of God. In today’s ecumenical *kairos*, ecclesiology proper needs to be further integrated with the church’s experience of the Kingdom as both present and future, indicative and imperative. Hopefully the WCC will one day be able to write a different document on the church, entirely concerned with the mission of a unified church in the world because ‘the Church was intended by God, not for its own sake, but to serve the divine plan for the transformation of the world.’¹⁷

The Ordination of Women

A fourth change that has occurred in Orthodox rhetoric (not theology!) is the attitude towards ordination of women. While churches that already ordain women to the priesthood and episcopacy could be dissatisfied with the current Orthodox refusal to do the same, a change in tone has occurred. *Napa* states:

17 CTCV, § 58.

On the question of the ordination of women to the priesthood, the theological conversation has continued since the 1988 Rhodes consultation on this subject (The Place of Women in the Orthodox Church and the Question of the Ordination of Women). *Theological considerations* have been put forward against the ordination of women, but *the lack of their universal acceptance* indicates that there is need for further reflection. We would hope that other churches respect the Tradition of the Orthodox Church, which does not ordain women.¹⁸ [emphasis added]

Boldly, *Napa* affirms that there might be no valid theological arguments against the Ordination of women. According to the Orthodox tradition, women are ordained to the diaconate, but not to the priesthood, and here it is more accurate to refer to tradition with a small t, not capital T like *Napa* does.¹⁹ In other words, it is a practical, contextual measure and other churches should respect this Orthodox practice. If that, indeed, is the intention of the Orthodox responders — and not simply this author’s wishful thinking — it is very courageous, given the type of resistance that these ecumenical representatives face from so-called traditionalists.²⁰ It is thus not surprising that the convergence document only briefly states, ‘Christians disagree as well over the traditional restriction of ordination to the ministry of word and sacrament to men only.’²¹

A growing number of female *and male* Orthodox theologians are calling for a re-evaluation of this restriction.²² At the very least (and contrary to the *Napa* statement quoted above), Orthodox should agree that the sacrament of

18 *Napa*, § 34.

19 CTCV, § 11, footnote 1 makes the following distinction: ‘As the fourth World Conference on Faith and Order pointed out in its report ‘Scripture, Tradition and Traditions,’ “By *the Tradition* is meant the Gospel itself, transmitted from generation to generation in and by the Church, Christ himself present in the life of the Church. By *tradition* is meant the traditional process. The term *traditions* is used . . . to indicate both the diversity of forms of expression and also what we call confessional traditions. . . .”’

20 At the 1998 meeting in Thessaloniki, the representatives of all autocephalous Orthodox churches affirmed their unwavering commitment to ecumenism (though not necessarily to the WCC) and condemned as ‘schismatics’ and ‘extremists’ those who use the theme of ecumenism in a derogatory manner. FitzGerald and Bouteneff, 136.

21 CTCV, § 45.

22 See for example Elisabeth Behr-Sigel and Kallistos Ware, *The Ordination of Women in the Orthodox Church*, Risk Book Series 92, Geneva: WCC Publications 2000; Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald, ‘The Characteristics and Nature of the Order of the Deaconess’, in: Thomas Hopko (ed.), *Women and the Priesthood*, Crestwood NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press 1983.

Ordination cannot be restricted to men only, since women can be ordained to the diaconate and since there is only one sacrament of Ordination into the episcopacy, priesthood, and diaconate. The tradition of having deaconesses in the East is a long and venerable reality, dating back to deaconess Phoebe,²³ through the more than 40 deaconesses serving at Hagia Sophia in Constantinople in the seventh century²⁴ to the 2004 decision of the Orthodox Church of Greece to continue to ordain deaconesses. Orthodox theologians should also agree²⁵ that there are no anthropological, soteriological, or ecclesiological reasons not to ordain women to the priesthood and episcopacy, while simultaneously affirming that the practice of the Orthodox Church has been *not* to do so.²⁶ Such a minimal agreement could be the next step of the discussion and perhaps the WCC should have boldly requested its member churches to concur in this regard.

Teaching Authority

A fifth contribution of CTCV to Orthodoxy consists in its remarks on the concrete ways in which the dynamic character of Tradition is manifested today. Without being static or fixed in the past, Tradition is dynamically manifested in Orthodox theology and spirituality as experienced today. For example, it is easy to discern the impact of Nicholas Afanasiev or Alexander Schmemmann's liturgical theology on the frequent communion and lay participation in contemporary Orthodox liturgical life; or the impact of John Zizioulas' theology on Orthodox-Catholic statements on episcopacy and communion. And yet, contemporary forms of theology and spirituality do not find their way into the authoritative statements or official teaching of the church, as it was the case in the church of the councils. A pan-Orthodox Council has been in preparation since 1961, and 2016 appears to provide the realization of this dream. In

23 Rom. 16:1

24 Timothy (Kallistos) Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, new edition, London *et al.*: Penguin Books 1997, 265.

25 ... although they don't all agree. Boris Bobrinskoy, for example, writes about the 'iconic nature of the priest's maleness', which he connects with the maleness of Christ in relationship to the Church — the Bride, and about the self-effacement, humility, and receptivity characteristic to the female gender. See Boris Bobrinskoy, *The Mystery of the Church: A Course in Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, translated by Michael Breck, Yonkers NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press 2012, 198-227.

26 For lack of space, it is impossible to treat these arguments extensively here. See Constantinos N. Yokarinis, 'The Priesthood of Women: A Look at Patristic Teaching', in: Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald (ed.), *Orthodox Women Speak: Discerning the "Signs of the Times"*, Geneva: WCC Publications 1999.

the meantime, however, there have been no pan-Orthodox means of proclaiming the teaching of the church authoritatively since the era of the ecumenical councils, despite pan-Orthodox gatherings throughout history. CTCV, however, provides a suggestion for ecumenical pronouncements that would rank — in terms of their authority — somewhere between the authority of theology (or lack thereof) and the pan-Orthodox council (whenever it will take place):

a certain kind of authority may be recognized in the ecumenical dialogues and the agreed statements they produce, when they reflect a common search for and discovery of the truth in love (cf. Eph. 4:15), urge believers to seek the Lord's will for ecclesial communion, and invite ongoing *metanoia* and holiness of life. . . . The ecumenical movement has made it possible for authoritative teaching by some Christian leaders to have an effect beyond the boundaries of their own communities, even now in our current state of division. For example, Archbishop Desmond Tutu's leadership in declaring that "apartheid was too strong to be overcome by a divided Church," the initiatives by the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to unite Christian leaders in the cause of ecology, the efforts by Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI to invite Christians and leaders from other faiths to join together in praying for and promoting peace, and of the influence of Brother Roger Schutz [of Taizé] as he inspired countless Christian believers, especially the young, to join together in common worship of the Triune God.²⁷

The WCC is certainly not part of the Orthodox 'magisterium' — to use a Catholic expression — but it gathers official representatives of Orthodox churches, and their statements should enjoy a certain level of authority within Orthodoxy. It is especially noteworthy that these Orthodox representatives do not work in isolation from representatives of other churches so there even seems to be a process of reception of non-Orthodox theologians who enjoy an incontestable spiritual and theological authority. Christian leaders extend their impact through reception in other churches. Moreover, the WCC convenes pan-Orthodox consultations, whose statements should have intra-Orthodox authority.

27 CTCV, § 50, 51.

WCC Change: The Integration of Orthodox Suggestions

CTCV states that this convergence text incorporates the results of many ecumenical dialogues, especially the Orthodox consultation held in Napa in 2011. '... The consultation and its report became a significant component of the next meeting of the Ecclesiology Working Group, and hence played a unique role in the process that led to the new text. ... The process was given fresh impetus after the inter-Orthodox consultation.'²⁸ The Orthodox consultation in Napa is highlighted so emphatically not simply to capture the benevolence of Orthodox responders, but because of its significant role in the process of transitioning from NMC to CTCV.

Here are several brief mentions of Orthodox contributions that were incorporated into CTCV:

- Trinitarian references in relationship to the church abound.
- The term *koinonia* is clearly explained.²⁹
- The threefold approach to Ordination into the episcopacy, priesthood, and diaconate was not introduced in the fourth century as NMC claimed, but early in the second century as St. Ignatius of Antioch testifies.³⁰
- CTCV recognizes the authority of the saints, monasticism, other spiritual persons, and the canonical tradition of the early church.³¹

28 CTCV ('Introduction' and 'Historical Note', 12, 44-45): 'the commission was aware of a significant lacuna in the responses process: there was as yet no substantial response from the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox churches. Accordingly, a major inter-Orthodox consultation was held Aghia Napa, Cyprus, in the Holy Metropolitanate of Constantia, in March of 2011, which included 40 delegated theologians from ten Eastern Orthodox and three Oriental Orthodox churches.'

29 The term '*koinonia*' received an entire section B in chapter 2, as well as numerous other interspersed references.

30 *Napa*, § 32 states: 'contrary to § 8 7 [of NMC], we would see the codification of the threefold ministry coming considerably earlier than the third century, as testified by the letters of St Ignatius.' See CTCV, § 46.

31 *Napa*, § 31 reads: 'Throughout history the Church has recognized the authority of saints, the witness of monasticism, in living and expressing the truth. This element of authority is missing from the NMC text.' CTCV, §50 incorporates this suggestion and adds: 'Throughout history the Church has recognized a certain authority in the lives of the saints, in the witness of monasticism and in various ways that groups of believers have lived out and expressed the truth of the gospel.' Moreover, *Napa*, § 34 applauds NMC for its reference to Apostolic Canon 34 of the Eastern tradition, in regard to primacy; CTCV, § 55 retains this reference.

- References to the fullness of the local church most likely stems from the eucharistic ecclesiology of Afanasiev, whose thought has significantly influenced ecumenical ecclesiologies.³²

The Term 'Church'

The main Orthodox contribution has to do with the use of the term 'church' in its singular and plural forms, pointing to various levels of church life: parish, diocese, region, denomination, and universal. *Napa's* motivation in clarifying this issue and discerning 'the limits of the church' is pastoral in nature, having to do with the recognition of Baptisms performed in other churches, eucharistic sharing (or lack thereof), and with inter-church relationships. On the one hand, the responders affirm the Orthodox self-identification with the church.

32 For example, Afanasiev's writings were mandatory reading for the bishops present at Vatican II. His main themes of eucharistic ecclesiology based on Ignatius of Antioch, catholicity, and the relationship between the local and universal are clearly echoed in CTCV, § 22: 'Where the whole mystery of Christ is present, there too is the Church catholic (cf. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Smyrneans*, 6), as in the celebration of the eucharist.' CTCV, § 31 adds along the same lines: 'At the same time, the Christian community in each place shares with all the other local communities all that is essential to the life of communion. Each local church contains within it the fullness of what it is to be the Church. It is wholly Church, but not the whole Church. Thus, the local church should not be seen in isolation from but in dynamic relation with other local churches. From the beginning communion was maintained between local churches by collections, exchanges of letters, visits, eucharistic hospitality and tangible expressions of solidarity (cf. 1 Cor. 16; 2 Cor. 8:1-9; Gal. 2:1-10). From time to time, during the first centuries, local churches assembled to take counsel together. All of these were ways of nurturing interdependence and maintaining communion. This communion of local churches is thus not an optional extra. The universal Church is the communion of all local churches united in faith and worship around the world. It is not merely the sum, federation or juxtaposition of local churches, but all of them together are the same Church present and acting in this world. Catholicity, as described in the baptismal catechesis of Cyril of Jerusalem, refers not simply to geographic extension but also to the manifold variety of local churches and their participation in the fullness of faith and life that unites them in the one *koinonia*. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechesis* 18, in J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* 33, 1044.' Here, Afanasiev's insistence on the fullness of the local church seems to be complemented by John Zizioulas' insistence on episcopal communion and on Dumitru Staniloae's emphasis on unity of faith. For more on the relationship between the ecclesiologies of these three Orthodox theologians, see Radu Bordeianu, 'Orthodox-Catholic Dialogue: Retrieving Afanassieff's Eucharistic Ecclesiology after Zizioulas and Staniloae', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 44/2 (2009), 239-265.

On the other hand, they recognize the ecclesial character of other Christians and refer to them as churches, admitting that this issue is not yet settled.³³

My suggestion would be to speak in terms of ‘fullness’ of the church in regards to Orthodoxy, a term that would essentially be similar to the Catholic claim that the Church of Christ ‘subsists in’ the Catholic Church (*Lumen Gentium* 8) — a technical term, however, that is foreign to the Orthodox mind. ‘Fullness’ language both speaks to the Orthodox self-identification with the church and simultaneously affirms the ecclesial character of other Christian churches.³⁴ I propose a subjective recognition of the fullness of the church in one’s community, with the acceptance of the fact that other Christians will recognize that same fullness in their own community. Phenomenologically, this would be no different from a Catholic experiencing the church of Christ ‘subsisting in’ the Catholic church, while recognizing elements of the church in others, or from a Methodist choosing to be a Methodist as opposed to a member of any other church based on where they experience the church to the highest degree possible. Such a phenomenological approach to ecumenical ecclesologies seems to point to one’s experience of the fullness of the church in their own denomination. Hence the Orthodox claim to be the fullness of the church is not meant to sound exclusivist, arrogant, or derogatory, but rather descriptive of their experience. The words of Paul Evdokimov are relevant in this regard: ‘We know where the Church is, but we cannot judge where the Church is not.’³⁵

Having said this, it is important to remember that churches of the Reformation find Vatican II’s language offensive; the technical term ‘defective’ (*defectus* in Latin) in actuality means ‘lacking fullness’ and results in the

33 *Napa*, § 13.

34 Afanasiev would disagree with this proposal. He criticized Orthodox and Catholic churches who looked at each other as containing a ‘diminished existence of the Church, or certain ‘vestiges’ of the Church, which allow the separated parts of the Church to continue their ecclesiastical life and for the sacraments to be administered.’ On the contrary, he continued, ‘[t]he nature of the Church presupposes that either she exists in her fullness or she does not exist at all, but there can be no partial existence nor can there be vestiges existing here and there. The Church is one in all the fullness of her nature and she is the only true Church, and it is not possible to have the Church where there is error.’ Nicolas Afanassieff, ‘Una Sancta’, *Irénikon* 36/4 (1963), 443-444. The English translation is incomplete — see Nicolas Afanassieff, ‘Una Sancta’, in: Michael Plekon (ed.), *Tradition Alive: On the Church and the Christian Life in Our Time: Readings from the Eastern Church*, Lanham MD: Rowan & Littlefield 2003, 8.

35 Paul Evdokimov, *L’Orthodoxie*, Paris: Desclée de Brouwer 1979, 343. See the same idea adopted in Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 308.

Catholic designation of the churches of the Reformation as ‘ecclesial communities’, as opposed to ‘churches’ — terminology reserved to Catholics and Orthodox in *Unitatis Redintegratio* 13-22.³⁶ For lack of space, an in-depth discussion of this subject is impossible here, but it would be beneficial to discuss the merits of reading Vatican II’s reference to ‘ecclesial communities’ with a special emphasis on ‘ecclesial’ — meaning that the churches of the Reformation are, indeed, churches (they have an ecclesial character) and with the understanding that some Christian families, such as the Anglicans, refer to themselves as ‘communion.’³⁷ Moving from ecumenical sensitivity to substantive disagreement, the language of ‘fullness’ is incompatible with the branch theory, according to which the church universal consists of the sum total of all the denominations existing today, thus recognizing the fullness of the church in each of the branches. Fullness language also conflicts with an ecclesiological exclusivism often found in evangelical circles, where only one form of adherence to faith is accepted as valid (e.g. acceptance of Christ as personal Lord and Saviour or baptism in the Spirit), placing the rest of Christians outside of the church.

As mentioned above, the proper limits of the church are far from being settled within Orthodoxy, but significant progress has been made, especially in loving dialogue with other churches. These ecclesiological principles, in turn, have terminological consequences: what does the term ‘church’ mean in ecumenical discussions? Obviously, on a global scale, it means the *Una Sancta*, the entire church of Christ. At a lower scale, *Napa* §11 suggests the term ‘local church’ for either regional churches (such as the local churches of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, etc.) or the local diocese. I would even be inclined to use the term ‘local church’ for the parish. As a matter of fact, in a pastoral setting, one would use ‘local church’ to refer primarily to the parish. Based on his historical analysis of the (practical, but not theological) transition from the episcopocentric to the presbyterocentric Eucharist, Zizioulas would probably reject such a designation³⁸ but, phenomenologically speaking, such

36 Criticized as a setback in ecumenical relationships, the CDF’s document, *Dominus Iesus* (2000, § 17) reaffirms these distinctions in unequivocal terms.

37 J.-M.-R. Tillard, *Church of Churches: The Ecclesiology of Communion*, translated by R. C. De Peaux (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press 1992), 314-315; Francis A. Sullivan, *The Church We Believe In: One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic* (New York: Paulist Press 1988), 30-32; and *Unitatis Redintegratio* 22 for a definition of ecclesial communities.

38 John D. Zizioulas, *Eucharist, Bishop, Church: The Unity of the Church in the Divine Eucharist and the Bishop During the First Three Centuries*, translated by Elizabeth Theokritoff, Brookline MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press 2001, 226-227.

use is justified by one's belonging to, and involvement into a specific parish community. Only rarely do the faithful get equally involved in diocesan life.

Could the term 'churches' also mean denominations? The Orthodox responders lament that NMC uses the term 'churches' to mean denominations, and they fear the branch theory or denominationalist ecclesiology implied in this usage, hence their appeal for more clarity.³⁹ Indeed, NMC, § 63 (box) refers to 'branch theory', '*tropoi* theory', 'denominationalism', and 'cultural families of churches' as valid models of church unity that affirm the fullness and equal value of the parts that constitute in aggregate the church universal, thus justifying the Orthodox suspicions that the WCC prefers a certain ecclesiological model for unity⁴⁰ and the reluctance of Orthodox theologians to refer to denominations as 'local churches'. Afanasiev makes the most notable exception in his proposal for Orthodox-Catholic unity, where each would be regarded as local churches of the same church, each enjoying ecclesial fullness in their administration of sacraments for salvation, which is the purpose of the church. He considered that the church remains one, even in the present divided Christendom.⁴¹

Because of these terminological inconsistencies, *Napa* §10 states: 'The problem at the foundation of the NMC text is that it continually speaks of the Church in a way that is ambiguous and therefore amenable to different and sometimes opposing ecclesiologies. *Potentially, everyone might be pleased, yet there is no true convergence represented*' [emphasis added]. The Orthodox responders are right: Christians see the limits of the universal church differently, and their understanding of their own church — as well as other churches — varies so greatly that it is difficult to speak in a united voice.

How did the convergence document deal with this recommendation? Sadly, it uses the term 'churches' in the sense of denominations much more than its predecessor, NMC. It acknowledges the 1950 Toronto agreement, but only in its exhortation to the churches (understood as denominations) to 'recognize

39 *Napa*, § 11.

40 The 1986 pan-Orthodox Conference of Chambésy states that the Orthodox church 'does not accept the idea of the 'equality of confessions' and cannot consider Church unity as an interconfessional adjustment.'

41 *Una Sancta* 5-6, 439-440. Afanassieff wrote: 'For eucharistic ecclesiology, the orthodox church and the catholic church are both Churches, or to be more exact, each local church of both groups remains a Church — as it was before so it is after the 'separation'. I put 'separation' in quotation marks for it did not take place and there is no separation. The Church of God is forever and remains one and unique. The break in communion was not able to produce the division of the Church which, by her very nature, cannot be divided into parts', *Una Sancta* 22, 465.

that the membership of the church of Christ is more inclusive than the membership of their own church body⁴² and not in regards to the principle that membership of the WCC does not imply recognition of the full ecclesial status of other members — a significant stipulation at Toronto. This is natural in a convergence document: visible unity implies mutual ecclesial recognition, but more terminological precision was necessary. Elsewhere, however, CTCV, § 32 clearly defines its terms:

Some churches are convinced that the bishop, as a successor to the apostles, is essential to the structure and reality of the local church. Thus, in a strict sense, the local church is a diocese, comprised of a number of parishes. For others, having developed various forms of self-understanding, the expression “local church” is less common and not defined in reference to the ministry of a bishop. For some of those churches, the local church is simply the congregation of believers gathered in one place to hear the Word and celebrate the Sacraments. Both for those who see the bishop as essential and for those who do not, the expression “local church” has also at times been used to refer to a regional configuration of churches, gathered together in a synodal structure under a presidency.

While the Orthodox influence is clearly distinguishable in the designation of ‘local church’ in reference to the diocese and regional churches, the convergence document seems to apply this term consistently to diocese or parish, but never to regions, as in the Orthodox suggestion.

A final remark regarding the limits of the church and the ensuing terminology has to do with secularization. In our internal quarrel, our Christian families often forget the scandal that we cause with our disunity and the need to minister to those who need our immediate attention. While we count those who are not active in their faith as members of our churches because they are nominally so, are they practically within the limits of our church life? In this sense, NMC, § 51 states:

One particularly striking experience of human weakness and failure that has afflicted the Christian community in via is the sometimes widespread discrepancy between membership in the church, on the one hand, and vibrant profession and practice of the Christian faith, on the other. Many of our communities face the challenge that some of their members seem to “belong without believing”, while other individuals opt out of Church

42 CTCV, § 9.

membership, claiming that they can, with greater authenticity, “believe without belonging”. The challenge of living our faith as believing communities in such a way that all those who belong are seriously committed Christians, and all who sincerely believe want to belong, is a challenge that we share; it crosses the lines which divide us.⁴³

Our canonical boundaries are artificial, since many ‘belong without believing’, while others ‘believe without belonging’. I mentioned in the beginning the millennial generation that is highly suspicious of institutions in general and religious institutions in particular. The number of those ‘spiritual but not religious’ is growing exponentially; they volunteer, they do acts of kindness associated with the Kingdom of God, but outside the canonical boundaries of our churches. It is time to advocate an experiential approach to ecclesiology, a phenomenological turn to ecumenism. From this humbling perspective, the question of the limits of the church, even canonical limits, becomes more complicated: those who ‘believe without belonging’ truly belong. Without resolving the paradox, it is helpful to remember Augustine’s words: ‘how many sheep there are outside, how many wolves within!’⁴⁴

Naturally, the convergence text could not have included all Orthodox suggestions. Noteworthy omissions include:

- While starting from the communion between the clergy and the laity, which has recently retrieved the priestly, prophetic, and kingly roles of the laity, how does Ordination maintain its real, meaningful content? CTCV should have said more about the clergy’s responsibility to administer the sacraments, teach the apostolic faith, express visibly the unity of the church, and synodality, while affirming the essential role of the laity in the church.⁴⁵
- While the final document mentions that in the past missions served the goal of colonialism, the Orthodox responders also added that ‘missionary practices have often perpetuated church and doctrinal divisions rather

43 Similarly, CTCV, § 7 decries ‘the advance of a global secular culture’ and acknowledges that ‘in some places, the Church faces the challenge of a radical decline in membership and is perceived by many as no longer relevant to their lives, leading those who still believe to speak of the need for a re-evangelization.’

44 Aurelius Augustine, *Homilies On John*, 45:12.

45 See more in *Napa*, § 28, CTCV, § 20, 51, 53.

than building unity', meaning that missions sometimes degenerated into proselytism.⁴⁶

- Among the list of injustices that the church should oppose, *Napa*, § 36 lists the caste system, a reference missing in CTCV, but one that would have been particularly meaningful to the faithful in India, where Christianity is attractive in large part due to its rejection of the caste system.

And yet, given the significance of the Orthodox suggestions incorporated into the convergence text on *The Church*, the Orthodox representatives can say without a doubt that their voices were heard, and they have heard the others. The positions of various churches are no longer parallel monologues, but reflect earnest change and convergence.

Conclusion

The creation of a convergence document on the church was not simply descriptive of the many churches members of the WCC, but it was also transformative. This was certainly the case of the Orthodox Church that was both transformed and caused transformation in the process. The convergence text affirms (sometimes in paradoxical terms) various aspects of ecclesiology and, in fairness, contains many boxes that point to areas of disagreement — some church-dividing, others as instances of diversity in unity. CTCV has more boxes of dissimilarity than NMC, so the areas in which Christians disagree seem to grow in the process of writing a convergence document. The Orthodox responders at Napa have their own share of responsibility in this regard. At times, their responses seem to be going in the wrong direction: when looking to produce a convergence text, one would expect to move issues from the category of disagreement to that of convergence, and not the other way around. And yet, ecumenical progress can only take place within the framework of honest assessment, so *Napa* and CTCV move in the right direction. Hopefully we have reached the maximum number of disagreement boxes and, from now on, that number will decrease.

46 *Napa*, § 35 states: 'Mission should serve, rather than hinder, Church unity. In history, missionary practices have often perpetuated church and doctrinal divisions rather than building unity.' Without mentioning proselytism, CTCV, § 6 does refer to the past relationship between missions and 'imperialistic colonization, which pillaged and even exterminated peoples unable to defend themselves from more powerful invading nations.'

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